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Threshold worlds: Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Pays* (2005)

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From bodily metamorphoses to fleshy holograms, from ghosts to clones, the fantastic has been a recurrent element in Marie Darrieussecq's fiction, from her very first novel *Truismes* (1995). However, as Shirley Jordan notes in her study of women writers, this aspect of Darrieussecq's writing remains open for study. I can't pretend to do justice to Shirley's challenge here though, since what follows are simply first thoughts about the use of the fantastic in a single text by Darrieussecq, *Le Pays* (2005), where I shall argue that it includes a particularly gendered application.

As we have seen in Catherine's paper – and other papers at this conference will undoubtedly also take this up – one of Darrieussecq's trademark forms of the fantastic is what I shall term 'the future present'. The settings of her novels or short stories may be broadly recognisable as our own contemporary reality – in *Le Pays*, for example, it is the world of Ikea and Starbucks – but some element or event nudges the setting into the future: the millennial celebrations in *Truismes*, water lapping at the edges of the Parisian suburbs in *Naissance des fantômes* (1998), the use of holograms in communications between the scientific personnel in the Antarctic and their loved ones in the outside world in *White* (2003) [the holograms mean that they can see, touch and hug rather than just talk], and cloning in two short stories republished in *Zoo* (2006). Kathryn Hume refers to such examples of fantasy as a 'departure from consensus reality', and this category includes 'technical or social innovations which

have not yet taken place, even though they may well happen in the future' (Hulme 1984: 21). Darrieussecq's clones and holograms fall into this group. Although the scientific techniques to create them already exist – thus this is not entirely the world of science fiction – the uses they are put to in her work are nonetheless futuristic and fantastic. The hologram is employed again in Darrieussecq's novel *Le Pays*. This time, however, holograms are used to communicate with the dead rather than with the absent living as in *White*. My paper explores what is at stake in Darrieussecq's mobilisation of the future present in *Le Pays* by examining the role of this threshold world that mediates the past, the present and the future.

Le Pays is a novel of two narratives, the individual strands of which are distinguished typographically: one, a narrative in the first-person, is in bold type, and the other, in the third-person, is in ordinary type. The two narratives alternate in sections of varying lengths. The narrator of the first-person section is Marie Rivière, a writer, in the process of writing a novel called *Le Pays*. The third-person section, in which Marie Rivière is the main protagonist, may perhaps represent passages of the text that she is writing, but this is never really made clear. The two narratives generally parallel each other in terms of chronology, themes and characters, and they take up some of the same episodes. While the first-person narrative predominantly tells of the narrator's daily life, the third-person narrative sometimes echoes this, but at other times constitutes a philosophical or imaginative meditation, usually inspired by something that has happened in that daily life.

The setting of the *Le Pays* is the *pays Yuoangui* – a fictional version of the *pays Basque* where Darrieussecq herself was born. In the novel, the 36-year old Marie Rivière, with her Argentinian husband Diego and their two-year old son Tiot, has returned to her birthplace, the now independent *pays Yuoangui*, after living a large

part of her life in Paris. The double narrative tells of this return to *le pays*, a return that also entails a return to Marie's family – her now separated parents and the memory of her dead grandmother and brother. The time-span of the novel is nine months, which coincides with Marie's second pregnancy, ending with the birth of her daughter Épiphanie. Yuoangui, Darrieussecq's fantasy of an independent Basque country, constitutes one element of the future present in this novel. The other is represented by the *Maison des Morts*. This fantasy establishment, peculiar to Yuoangui, is a place where the living can get back in touch with their dead.

I will first briefly examine the key elements of Darrieussecq's novel – *le pays* itself, family relations, death, pregnancy and writing – before drawing them together in a consideration of the role of the fantastic in this text.

So, what is behind Darrieussecq's fantastic setting? The Basque country is, of course, a threshold world in itself. Lying between France and Spain, it currently permeates the borders of both those countries, its lands and people being split between them. It has an indigenous language but no recognition of the right to exist as a state. The fictional Yuoangui is only a thinly-veiled version – with its 'jeux de pelote' (48), its world-famous ham (157), and its cities, referred to by initials – B. Nord (read Bayonne); B. Sud (Bilbao) and B. sur mer (Biarritz). However, Darrieussecq's creation of this fictional Yuoangui is clearly not to be read as a political statement about Basque independence. The third-person narrative, recounting a pre-Independence 'concert indépendantiste' (139), explicitly closes down any political purposes by describing Marie as 'athée dans une assemblée de fidèles' (139). Moreover, *le pays* is just one element of the novel, and thus the text cannot be read as a political allegory or utopia. Rather, it means that the very setting of the novel – *le*

pays Yuoangui – contributes to the hesitation – the ambiguity between the real and the imaginary – that Todorov argues is the defining characteristic of the fantastic.

Darrieussecq's novel is – in part anyway – a reflection on the question of origins. What does it mean to be from somewhere? What does it mean to say 'we' about a people, a nation? What does it mean to go back home? Here, the transformation of *le pays Basque* into *le pays Yuoangui* constitutes a way of conveying the strangeness of this familiar but *unheimlich* state of returning home. On the one hand, Marie is 'chez elle' (24) in 'la familiarité du pays' (48), relishing the rediscovery of the sea and the mountains, the climate and the vegetation. On the other, her return after twenty years away represents 'un nouvel exil' (140) and transforms her into 'une immigrée récente' (145), dependant for communication on others, even her two-year old son Tiot. Since Independence, 'la vieille langue' of Yuoangui has become the language of the everyday, rather than something that the older generation speak when they don't want children to understand. Tiot picks it up quickly at school, but Marie, who never learnt it as a child, finds it incomprehensible, despite the language-learning programme she follows. Moreover, although she knows B. Nord well, the street names have changed and she doesn't even know how to pronounce them; she feels destabilised: 'elle, dans son pays [...] elle était analphabète' (221); 'elle était rentrée au pays [...] mais tout lui échappait. [...] Elle ne rentrerait jamais' (90). This problematisation of language constitutes a 'graphic form' of the 'gap between signifier and signified' that is a feature of the modern fantastic according to Rosemary Jackson (38): 'the fantastic [...] pushes towards an area of non-signification [...] the gap between signifier and signified dramatizes the impossibility of arriving at definitive meaning, or absolute "reality"' (41).

However, the notion of birthplace – ‘le pays natal’ (90); origins – comprises more than landscape and language; family, and the past, are also involved. Marie’s return to *le pays* is, then, also about family relations and childhood memories. Indeed, part of the couple’s decision to move there from Paris, Marie says, is about forming her son’s future childhood memories – about creating ‘un paysage pour Tiot’ (50) that will be quite different from the sad, muddy public gardens of Paris of his first years.

Negotiating her own childhood memories and relationships is a key aspect of Marie’s re-insertion in the place of her birth. Relations with her parents are strained. Her mother, a larger than life character, is a sculptor, a celebrity in Yuoangui. Divorced from Marie’s father, she lives in an expensive modern house of glass designed by her new, younger architect-partner. Marie’s mother is renowned for her funereal sculptures, which play an important role in the modern version of Yuoangui’s traditional funeral rites – the strange details of which are only vaguely hinted at. The mother-daughter relationship is full of conflict and Marie experiences her mother as a rival. As a writer, she wants to be the more famous of the two. Her father, a ruined man because of alcohol and gambling, lives in a caravan at the end of his ex-wife’s garden.

Yet the source of Marie’s strained relations with her parents ultimately lies elsewhere – in the fate of her two brothers, whom her parents refuse to talk about. The first, Paul, died in infancy and she never knew him. She doesn’t really even know what happened: ‘le subitement mort, l’enfant perdu’ (109) was either found dead in his pram or was snatched – it is never clear which. The other brother, Pablo, a South American child, ‘adopté à la place de Paul mort’ (212) when Marie was 6, now suffers from schizophrenia, and is in a psychiatric clinic in Paris. Marie blames

Pablo's illness on her parents' adoption of him; she believes his conviction that he is 'le fils du général de Gaulle' (26) is his way of reinventing his ancestry.

Marie's life is haunted by the ghosts of her two brothers: 'j'avais trente-six ans [...] Mais je n'étais pas sûre d'échapper à mes frères' (247). She misses the sibling relationship she had with Pablo as a child, before he became ill. And the void that Paul represents – the void that represents Paul – is part of her own identity. On her return to *le pays*, Marie also finds she misses her grandmother with whom she had a close relationship as a child. Her subsequent visits to the *Maison des Morts* are where the second element of the fantastic comes into play in Darrieussecq's novel.

The *Maison des Morts* is a modern development of Yuoanguis's strange 'traditions funèbres' (213). For outsiders, it is 'une institution d'un goût douteux' (213), but, for the Yuoanguis, it is a fashionable – if kitsch – trend in family memorialisation, by means of which the dead come back to life. There is, however, nothing supernatural about this transformation of absence to presence, of past to present, of families being able to talk again with their lost loved ones. Nor is this seeming immortality a miracle of medical science. Rather, it is a product of the contemporary technological revolution: a computer-generated illusion, a hologram. The computer programme provides a holographic outline that bereaved relatives fill with details of their lost loved ones, the hologram only being as faithful to the original as these programmed details allow. There are even advanced software functions such as 'ageing', so that the dead can advance with the years alongside those left behind. Marie's family, however, have only bothered to input a certain amount of detail, so that when she announces to her grandmother's hologram that she is pregnant again, there is no response: 'l'hologramme se mit sur pause [...] affrontant un trou de sa carte de mémoire' (201). Ultimately, the basic programme takes over and,

disappointingly, ‘l’hologramme de ma grand-mère débita les clichés de la joie familiale’ (202).

Marie also accesses the hologram of her dead baby brother Paul, but none of his details have been input, and she is faced with a sinister ‘hologramme vide’ (207): ‘une forme humanoïde debout, translucide, animée d’une lente oscillation’ (207-8). She returns time and time again to the *Maison des Morts*, once even staying so late that she completely forgets to pick up her son from school. She vainly tries to give Paul’s empty hologram some substance, drawing on the bank of recurrent family characteristics that are stored on the computer drive. However, in making him a little boy, she ends up with a troubling image of her own son, and in advancing him to adult age the computer offers her the arguably even more uncanny ‘hologramme de moi en homme’ (251).

For Jackson, the fantastic is above all ‘a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss’ (3). In doing so, it interrogates the limits of reality, and ‘opens up [...] to that which lies outside the law’ (4), outside the limits of reason. In *Le Pays*, the *Maison des Morts* is undoubtedly one manifestation of such a literature of desire. Indeed, loss is a recurrent theme in Darrieussecq’s work, which teems with absences, disappearances and spectral presences. In particular, the figure of a missing or dead child returns time and time again – in *Le Mal de mer* (1999), in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* (2001), in *White*, in *Le Pays* and, indeed, in Darrieussecq’s latest novel *Tom est mort* (2007). It is a theme which, Darrieussecq confides in interview, echoes an event – or events – in her own family and which continues to haunt her (Lambeth 2006: 811). Thus, this use of the fantastic in *Le Pays* constitutes an engagement with issues around loss and family memories and memorialisation, and around death, mourning and commemoration on the cultural as

well as the personal level. The novel reflects on – and leads us to reflect on – the trauma of loss, the process of mourning, and how we remember – or forget – the dead.

However, the use of the fantastic here also needs to be contextualised in relation to another key aspect of the diegesis – Marie’s pregnancy. For Darrieussecq’s *Le Pays* is also a pregnancy diary. The beginning of the novel coincides with the first signs of conception: ‘Une sensation clapotante me prit à l’estomac, une sorte de vide, d’une espèce particulière, plein de salive’ (16). And the novel ends with the birth of Marie’s daughter Épiphanie. During the course of the novel, the different stages of pregnancy are chronicled: the pregnancy test; the nausea of the first three months; the development of the embryo over the weeks and months that follow; the concomitant changing body shape, weight and mobility of the mother; the scan where the baby and her gender become visible; the baby’s movements, from the first little flutterings to the almost fully grown baby turning over in her womb, when ‘du bout des doigts on pouvait remonter le long de ses vertèbres, jusqu’à ses fesses rondes et dures’ (219); up until the baby is born: ‘Il y avait quelqu’un dans ce très petit corps, quelqu’un était venu; si pliée et repliée encore, que nous pouvions la tenir dans nos deux mains; mais qui se déploierait lentement hors de nous’ (295). Meanwhile, Marie decorates the baby’s room, goes swimming, and rests: ‘Elle fabriquait Épiphanie tranquillement’ (183). As we have seen, she also visits the *Maison des Morts*, and she is writing a book.

In *Le Pays*, Darrieussecq brings together the processes of writing and pregnancy. The gestation of a baby and of a book are considered to be similar: ‘Je laissais venir un livre et un enfant’ (153). Both include periods of activity, of inactivity, of mental absence or void, and waiting. Just as in resting, in doing nothing, a pregnant mother is nourishing her unborn baby, so too, for Marie, a book requires a

similar period of passive gestation before it is ready to be written: ‘l’attente est l’état original de l’écriture’ (77); ‘ce vide qui est l’écriture, et la possibilité de l’écriture’ (191). In this way, *Le Pays* is also a meditation on the process of writing.

Le Pays is, then, a book of many themes, of multiple elements. Ultimately, though, it is pregnancy that draws the various elements of the novel together. Pregnancy is in itself, of course, a threshold world, where the self becomes other, where the self is split, where a new self takes root within; it is at the threshold of nature and culture (Stewart 1999: x). Pregnancy represents a kind of metamorphosis where the body takes over. It brings about heightened perceptions and emotions; it is an altered state. Pregnancy and birth are about giving life but may also, tragically, be linked to death. Pregnancy mobilises the most positive thoughts and the darkest fears. The mother’s body is the site of origins, and, as for Darrieussecq’s Marie, it is not uncommon during pregnancy to reflect on one’s own origins and to revisit relations with one’s parents.

Interestingly, in her discussion of ‘the tendency of fantasy towards non-signification’ (69), Jackson, drawing on psychoanalysis, refers to the work of Julia Kristeva to suggest that the fantastic in literature is linked to Kristeva’s concept of the ‘semiotic’ (178). Jackson is primarily concerned with the semiotic’s subversive disruption of an oppressive symbolic order; here, the use of the fantastic works against closure and unity. Kristeva’s semiotic is linked to the pre-linguistic, pre-oedipal relationship with the mother. For Kristeva, women, especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding, have a close relationship to the semiotic; indeed, the mother is an example *par excellence* of the Kristevan *sujet, en-procès* between the semiotic and the symbolic (Kristeva 1974). In the 1970s, Kristeva’s semiotic was of course used alongside Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine* to theorise a conceptual

space for women's expression outside or beyond – not confined to – the symbolic. I am not proposing a specifically Kristevan reading of *Le Pays* here though, and I am certainly not positing the novel as an example of *écriture féminine* in its classic Cixousian sense, although it is fascinating that Darrieussecq has included in her novel some implicit intertextual references to French feminist work of the same period – Luce Irigaray's 'Mécanique des fluides' and Monique Wittig's split subject, written 'J/e', which Marie herself employs, albeit differently, to convey the void she experiences during both pregnancy and writing: 'un sujet ni brisé ni schizoïde, mais fendu, décollé' (211).

Rather, I suggest that the fantastic in *Le Pays* is a mode that enables the representation of what is normally non-representable, unsayable. Or, as T. E. Apter puts it, it is 'a means of focusing the difficulties in perception, knowledge and emotion which often cannot be differentiated by ordinary language' (135). On the one hand, as we have seen, this relates to loss and death. On the other, it is gender-specific and relates to pregnancy, to birth, to the mystery of life, to women's experiences of this 'place apart', as Susan Stewart refers to the threshold world of pregnancy (x). 'Comment', muses Marie, 'expliquer à ceux qui ne savent pas' (168) what it feels like to be pregnant, to carry a baby in your womb? In its use of the fantastic, Darrieussecq's *Le Pays* goes some of the way to finding a language: 'pour décrire le monde, et en repousser les limites' (135). In *Le Bébé* (2002), Darrieussecq wrote a *récit* of the first year of her son's life. In *White*, she pens a stunning description of the moment of conception. In *Le Pays*, she writes about pregnancy but in a different mode – that of the fantastic. In doing so, she does not produce monstrous births of the kind Lucie Armitt finds in her analysis of fantastic tropes in women's fiction, but rather she uses the language of the fantastic to create a context and a climate in which to try

to convey the experiences of pregnancy and the fantastic *pays* that is the pregnant mother's body and mind. As Darrieussecq's narrator Marie says, 'c'était simplement du travail, mon travail, qui ne laissait rien d'indicible' (286).

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